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One Hundred Quatrains

FROM THE

Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám

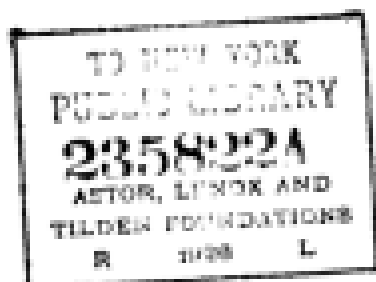
A RENDERING IN ENGLISH VERSE BY

Elizabeth Alden Curtis

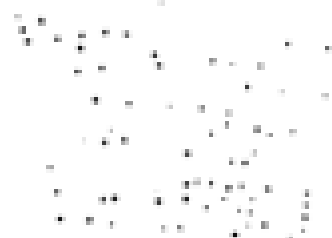
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

Richard Burton

GOVERNEUR NEW-YORK
BROTHERS OF THE BOOK
MDCCCXCIX



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To My father

TO OMAR KHAYYÁM

Omar, old Persian, thou hast long been Dust,
And still we con thy Yellow-Page,— we must !

Mayhap thy Spirit, with its strange unrest,
Read all our bosoms at a Master-Thrust.

And one day pious, in a mood to bless
Thy Sáki, and the next day — something less,
Half Rake, half Saint, as changeful as the Moon,
Thou didst personify Man's Fitfulness.

Ah, stern Materialist from Mystic Skies,
Thy hopeless courage dims our human eyes,
And mingling with our sob for *Thee and Me*
Thy Bulbul's Péhlevi still swells and dies.

Yea, still the Bough, and still the Vineyard Wall
Shall cast their subtle Charm about us all,
And thus, imbued with thine own Tolerance,
We 'll render thee our fairest Rose of all.

INTRODUCTION

THE appeal which old Omar makes to us across the centuries suggests two things. It denotes the modern sympathy for his type of philosophy, with its blend of Horatian hedonism and Old Testament fatalistic pessimism, sounding the deeps of life and death, and—what is of more import—it shows that truly fine literature is in a sense of no time: the fundamental human cry has no nationality. The present cult of the Persian Sage-Singer, while certain elements thereof may be ephemeral, is yet underlaid by that genuine appreciation which will be permanent because its object possesses a steadfast attraction.

11

The potent influence of Omar is visible not alone by the ever widening circle of readers, but also by the number of those who are moved to make English renderings of this alluring classic of the East. So far as translations go, FitzGerald's, of course, stands forth in rugged loneliness. Take it for all in all, his version is matchless. Yet Mr. Le Gallienne has shown us of late that on the side of colour and seduction of music, "Old Fitz," as Tennyson was fond of calling him, has not said the last word. FitzGerald performed a feat next to impossible for the translator: he made a second classic of his task, giving the world an English poem which challenges the original in sheer strength and beauty. Nevertheless, in Mr. Le Gallienne's quatrains there are felicities that overmatch like places in the older rendering. And so others still are led to the essay; be-

fore the eyes of every lover of Omar it would seem as if there hovered a dim, fair creature beckoning on to the endeavour to express in still more perfect phrase the magic melodies of that Poet of the Mystic Vine. Who has not felt the lure of that call?

The rendering herewith printed is to be taken, then, as a personal expression of an experience too strong, too delightful, to be confined to the passive receptivity of one who merely reads. No challenge or comparison is implied, as the graceful foreword says, and I feel sure that others who, like myself, sit down to it in this mood, will derive therefrom an exceptional pleasure. Miss Curtis's version is most sympathetic, firmly yet delicately touched, at times lovely in the extreme. Stanzas XLVII, XLVIII, and XLIX, to choose almost at random, are worthy of the original—which is the ulti-

mate of praise. Those familiar with existing versions will be interested to get in hand a new rendering so able, and will realise how good a piece of work is here; while those who receive their first introduction to Omar through her efforts, may be assured that the lady-usher who bows them into the Presence has the manners suited to such Society.

Richard Burton.

October 23d, 1899.

FOREWORD

You who live in the country know that there are men and women, and little children even, who rake after the loads in the fragrant season of the hay-harvest.

Is it not a fashion applied the world over, in every walk of life, to every trade! We follow in the footsteps of our betters, and are at infinite pains to gather up the overflow of their bounty.

Wise men have translated the philosophy of the Persian Omar. This little book is but a "raking after" these greater ones; lest, perchance, one crimson rosebud, one chaplet of vine-leaves, be left, forgotten, by the wayside.

E. A. C.

*Hartford, Connecticut,
August 1, 1899.*

ONE HUNDRED QUATRAINS

I

Up! Now the sun, ablaze in guerdoned might,
Has routed all the starry hosts of night,
And hurling shafts upon the castle-wall,
Secures the 'vantage to the realm of light.

II

"The Vine its fruitage to your pleasure strips,
Come in, ye laggards, cease your wanton quips,"
A Mighty Voice within the hostel cried,
"Ere Fate strikes down the tankard from your lips."

III

And as the chanticleer his clarion shrilled,
The loiterers swelled in answer, single-willed,
"Then open, for the Cup is at the dregs,
And once run dry, may never be refilled."

IV

While yet the snow is on the distant towers,
The earth, at Musa's touch, blooms white with flowers,
And now the resurrection of the leaf
Is come again, with 'Isa's healing showers.

V

If great Jamshýd, and such as Kai-Kaiús,
Have fallen victim to Death's far-flung noose,
 Brother, will Death spare thee? Then quickly seek
Brief solace in the Grape's reviving juice.

VI

And hark! This scheme that I myself propose
The nightingale enlarges to the rose;—
 “Drink, drink, Beloved; ah, Beloved, drink;
Flush those pale petals ere they droop and close!”

VII

Then fling the Ashes of Regretting by,
And fill with me the ruddy tankard high,
 For life is like a bird upon the wing,
And gone as swiftly as an Houri's sigh.

VIII

At Naishápúr or Balk the days will pass,
And changing moons with silver flood the grass,
 The bitter draught be mingled with the sweet,
The sands of life keep running through the glass.

IX

The rose to-day that riots o'er the wall
A ruin at to-morrow's feet must fall :
Then woo the flower with no vain regret,—
Ye but lament the common end of all.

X

Feast not with Hátim Tai, nor mourn the rose,
Nor follow Rustam to a meed of blows,
For Fate inexorable still endures,
And, wise or foolish, he must reap who sows.

XI

Along the desert's verge, in grassy bowers,
With thee, O love, to dream away the hours,—
The human ant-hill and the ants forgot,—
I would not barter for a sultan's powers.

XII

A roll of verse, a crust of wheaten bread,
Thy voice for music, and my soul is fed ;
The ruby of thy crimson lips for wine—
Ah, who would choose a paradise instead !

XIII

Mayhap the holy eremite is wise,
Mayhap his "Eden" is a thing of lies,
 But while the moment thrills with love and wine,
Why covet an uncertain paradise?

XIV

The red rose cried, when flushing Dawn grew bold,
"Truly as Yúsuf's flower I am told;
 My treasure-heart, the blood upon my dress,
Make fitting symbol of the lust for gold!"

XV

O kiss the wine-cup then, dear, foolish one,
And think not, when thy little course is done,
 That men will mine thy poor, forgotten dust,
As if, like earth's, thy veins with gold had run.

XVI

And, struggling spirit, let not worldly gain,
Nor worldly loss, provoke thy heart to pain,
 For all the burden of such fevered dross
Will filter through thy wasting palms like rain.

XVII

About this hostel old, strange echoes cling,
And light and dark their spanless curtains fling;
 Lo, through the silent years this place has giv'n
Shelter alike to bondsman and to king.

XVIII

Those crumbling portals, where the wild rose creeps,
Once shadowed Bahrám's pomp: now on the steeps
 The lion stalks, and e'en the timid roe
Fears not that master-hunter,—for he sleeps.

XIX

The sap that dies yon crimson-drenchéd rose,
Perchance from some dead monarch's bosom flows;
 And that dark violet may well have drawn
Its azure from a maiden's eyes—who knows!

XX

These slender sedges that ye calmly trace
Along the river-brink,—ah, muse a space,
 Maybe that when ye tear them from the sward,
Ye mar the beauty of some tranquil face.

XXI

Love, by the Seven Stars and Seven Seas,
In this short life I swear to take my ease ;
 Each star, they say, has shone a thousand years,
And I shall die and be as old as these !

XXII

For in the silent Country of Surcease
The white-souled throngs do hourly increase,
 That, having drained life's cup of bitter-sweet,
May lay them down at last to sleep in peace.

XXIII

And in the paths that yesterday they trod,
The bulbul sings, and still the roses nod ;
 What hand shall one day pluck the bloom away
That springs above us from the fragrant sod ?

XXIV

A little while upon this grassy steep,
A little while, and under it we sleep,
 And though we live, and love, and sink to rest,
The burning stars their circling vigils keep.

XXV

Some seek the shelter of the church, forsooth,
And some pursue the gain of mart and booth;
But still the Watchman on the height proclaims:—
“Blind fools, ye one and all have missed the truth.”

XXVI

For e'en the greatest pen will cloud with rust,
And wisest tomes have yellowed into must.
Ah, who shall tell the scholar from the fool
When both alike are crumbled into dust?

XXVII

From youth to age I sought to swell my store,
And begged of priest and scholar, each his lore,
But though my shadow lengthens down the years,
I still am standing at a fast-closed door.

XXVIII

Yea, though my life long I have toiled to learn
To choose the Truth, and swift the lie to spurn,
This is the only surety I have gleaned:—
“From dust we come and unto dust return.”

XXIX

We come as choiceless as the flowing tide,
We go resisting and unsatisfied ;
 How many, love, when we are gone, will stroll
Together by this very garden-side !

XXX

All unconsulted do we come and go :
O Thou, who quickened us to life, to know
 Of sin and sorrow, shalt Thou then complain
That we should use our unsought portion so !

XXXI

I harnessed Saturn of the Seventh Crown,
And saw my name enrolled of high renown ;
 But when I stormed the Citadel of Fate,
The Spectre mocked me with a visor down.

XXXII

Perchance there is a God, and he reveals
An after-life, and breaks the Seven Seals :
 Would we not crouch, at this apocalypse,
Blind in the light Eternity conceals !

XXXIII

O what are we, who for a space abide
To seek our cause of being, far and wide,
 But pebbles, thrown upon a shelving beach,
And washed about by each recurring tide?

XXXIV

And human life, a derelict that drifts
Forlorn upon a course each current shifts;
 Poor craft, forsook of beacon and of crew,
And left to founder in the yawning rifts!

XXXV

When, of a sudden, from my thoughts I woke,
'T was thus a flagon at my elbow spoke:—
 “Waste not thy spirit in conjecture vain,
O drink and revel ere the bowl be broke.”

XXXVI

Perchance this earthen jar inanimate
Did once possess a human form and fate,
 And some fair woman's cheek once rested there,
Upon its lip, where mine was pressed but late.

XXXVII

And roughly though the potter shaped the bowl,
Like me it once possessed a human soul,
For lo, the draught I quenched my thirst withal,
Was bitter with the tears of mortal dole.

XXXVIII

Does not the Master-Potter treat the clay
Of human kind in such a luckless way,
And moulding us upon his busy wheel,
Set us to labour for a little day?

XXXIX

Then ere you drink, a liberal portion throw
From out your cups that with the Ruby glow,
And in your feasting pause, to pour this free
Libation to the thirsty souls below.

XL

The tulip-cup each morn is raised anew,
To catch its portion of the heavenly dew;
Well, if the flower revels out its day,
How much, Beloved, how much more should you!

XLI

Then drain your portion ere the goblet slip,
And seek no further then a perfumed lip ;
 If you are nothing, can your future lack
The shield of honour you so lightly strip?

XLII

From Death's dark stirrup-cup we may not shrink,
But kiss the shadowy brim, and fearless drink,
 For all must leap the precipice of Fate,
When each has stood his moment on the brink.

XLIII

"My soul," I cried, "if thou canst soar away
Unfettered by this freight of base-born clay,
 Up, burst thy bondage, and on steadfast wing
Betake thee heavenward, Oh, do not delay!"

XLIV

"Khayyám, Khayyám," my soul did protest raise,
"Thy body holds me but a span of days,
 Beyond the Seventh Heaven is a tent
Which no ferrásh may strike, no conflict raze."

XLV

Sweetheart, resolve the Question as you please,
Then say, ah, say indeed, when this life flees
 Shall we be missed — shall we be missed among
The Sands that border on the Seven Seas?

XLVI

Think not the Sáki shall create no more
When you and I are slipped beyond the Door,
 For through the floodgates of Eternity
The tide of souls unendingly shall pour.

XLVII

Quick, now the creaking caravan doth bend
And strain, adown the track of Time to wend;
 Dawn whitens on the bleaching wreck of years,—
Thy lips, Beloved, till the end, the end!

XLVIII

We breathe a doubt, aye, in another breath
We hang our faith on what the Koran saith;
 Believers, scoffers, lords of bold misrule,
We cannot doubt we breathe; — for that were death.

XLIX

Yea, on a breath is all existence hung,
The thread on which these beads of life are strung;
One day perchance, when we shall breathe our last,
By that last breath the Secret may be wrung.

L

This subtle Majesty, beyond the scope
Of weak intelligence wherewith we grope,
We see it blossom in the growing rose,
And feel its presence, while we dare not hope.

LI

A flash of light, we glimpse a shining mark,
Then night is blacker for the vanished spark,
The while the spectacle of life goes on,
Enacted just beyond us in the dark.

LII

If men were given eyes too dull for sight,
Which next were closed in death's eternal night,—
God trifling with his images of clay,—
O were this justice and His holy right?

LIII

Then seek no more by book and rule to bide,
But nestle, star-eyed sweetheart, at my side,
And cheek to cheek beneath the dusky moon,
We 'll drown discussion in the Purple Tide.

LIV

And thus my firm decision will I shape,
From Lore and Dogma to obtain escape;
Three times will I put off those withered hags,
And woo the comely daughters of the Grape.

LV

For why preserve a scholarly intent,
Pursuing virtue with unwearied bent?
When death Eternal trembles on the dawn,
What matter how the midnight hour be spent?

LVI

And whether there be seven heavens or eight,
To-day is passing on the Wheel of Fate,
Morn may not rise, and yesterday is dead,—
O come, and 'neath the Vine thy life translate!

LVII

Last night I dreamed the sáki of my soul
Swept lightly toward me with the jocund Bowl,
And holding it before my sober lips,
“My lord,” she cried, “this draught will make thee
whole!”

LVIII

That magic alchemy, so long time sought,
I have discovered, singly and untaught.
The great transmuter is the Purple Grape,—
Life’s antidote within the wine cup caught!

LIX

Yea, yea, it is the Sultan Grape who rules,
Whose mastery nor age nor wisdom cools,
His ruddy glamour mantled over life
To turn the heads of sages and of fools.

LX

O Thou who planted in our hearts the fire
Of hot and irresistible desire,
Thou badst us save the wine of life, and then
Irrevocably tipped the goblet higher.

LXI

They say, they say the ancient writings show
A paradise where milk and honey flow,
But I will take my nectar from the Grape,
And find Elysium where the vineyards blow.

LXII

Love, if the keepers of that Promised Land
Bar up their gates, and issue strict command:—
“Toppers and lovers shall not enter here,”
'T will be as empty as thy little hand.

LXIII

But though the way we tread, the steep we climb,
Be lit with virtue or be black with crime,
Nor cups we drain, nor orisons we raise
Can check the moving caravan of time.

LXIV

And those whose eyes have languished o'er one cup,—
Twin hearts, whose ministry was bite and sup,—
Not one of all those dear-beloved souls
Returns to lift its broken fellow up.

LXV

So when a sage awakes from out the deep
To tell his dream, and thus its form to keep,
 He holds a torch before our blinking eyes,—
The torch flames out,—and back he sinks to sleep.

LXVI

Out, out I sent my soul to sound life's well,
And swift returning, of its quest to tell:
 "I am the pilgrim and the pilgrimage;
Can fashion life of heaven," it cried, "or hell."

LXVII

A transitory smile amid the tears,
An hour of heaven in this vale of years,
 Then back they troop, those ministers of hell,
Despair and doubt, grief and o'erwhelming fears.

LXVIII

We are but shadow-figures, rudely thrown
Upon the lanthorn-cloth, and dimly shown
 In vacillation on the Master's arm
To whirl anon into the black Unknown.

LXIX

Aye, we are pawns in that portentous game
Of chess,—or life, why cavil at the name?

Soon will he sweep the pieces from the board,
And then ;—the rose will blossom all the same.

LXX

A shuttle-cock is man, who lightly goes
Or stays, at Destiny's capricious blows ;

But He who tossed thee on Fate's battledore,
He made thee—and He knows, *He knows*, HE
KNOWS!

LXXI

To that blue arch, that smiling heaven-cup,
Address no pleas nor look devoutly up,

'T is but a span of soulless atmosphere,
Helpless to send thee sweet or bitter sup.

LXXII

Then bless thy sweet, or bear thy bitter fate,
The world is aging and the dawn is late :

What canst thou do, with curses or with prayers,
One destined letter to obliterate !

LXXIII

At birth our primal act and final deed
Were written for the after years to read.

Alas, poor souls, why strive against the lot
Inevitable Fate long since decreed?

LXXIV

Nor whence thou comest, soul, nor where wilt go,
Is granted thy mortality to know;

Quick, ere thou goest take thy fill of sweets,
Mayhap the Paradise is here below!

LXXV

There is a mighty bull supports the earth,
Another, Taurus, of a heavenly birth;

Men bray, a drove of asses, 'twixt these two,—
At least to eyes of wisdom, and of mirth.

LXXVI

Give me a smiling face, a sparkling brim,
Curse, brothers, an ye will, or sing a hymn.

Though my allegiance has not been the Lord's,
I swear my prosing has not wearied him.

LXXVII

The flower-beautiful, the rose of Truth,
Maybe, despite the errors of my youth,
 Will blossom sooner in my wayward heart,
Than at the shrivelled dervish's breast, forsooth.

LXXVIII

Wine, love, and song, bow-brows and gleaming hair,—
Wrath of the Seven Realms for these I'd dare,
 And though the Master sanctioned or reviled,
This favour in the tavern street would wear!

LXXIX

Yet Thou, with that foreknowledge of it all,
Could fashion creatures preordained to fall,
 And send them forth in danger of hell-fire
For each infringement of thy gracious thrall?

LXXX

Well what, if in our hearts unreconciled,
There lurk some question of that justice mild
 Which but rewardest heaven for our works,—
A toothsome sweet to lure a peevish child!

LXXXI

Thou settest for my feet the mesh of sin,
With threat of vengeance should I trip therein,
And if I verge a hair's breadth from thy law
Thy prophets add "damnation" to their din.

LXXXII

O Thou Omnipotent, who in a day
Hast called us into life from out the clay,
Aye, we are drunk with sin, but sober too,—
Sober in hope Thou 'lt wash these sins away.

THE BOOK OF POTS

LXXXIII

The month of Ramadân was fading by
With abstinence and fasting gaunt and dry,
 When lo, there rose within the potter's shop,
Among the little pots, a whisper sly.

LXXXIV

And in the growing dusk I heard one cry
“Ah, wherefore did he mould us, you and I?
 Not surely to unmake us, sherd by sherd,
And cast us into darkness bye and by?”

LXXXV

“No,” said another, “that were wantonness,
The creatures of his hand to thus distress,
 For we would not destroy our fellow pots,
And he, the master, he could not do less!”

LXXXVI

Then in a dingy corner of the room,
A little bitterly, from out the gloom,
 A crooked vessel spake; “See here,” it said,
“Did I consign myself to such a doom?”

LXXXVII

And still another blurted where he lay,
With quite a wordy, eloquent display,
 “Pray who is he, to make, and mar, and sell,
And traffic with us in so free a way?”

LXXXVIII

“Listen,” a fifth replied, “the sages say
That he will judge us on a final day ;—
 But pshaw, I have no fear of such a test,
He will remember we are all but clay !”

LXXXIX

“Alas,” said one, “I do not dread abuse,
Nor yet this question of some hidden ruse,
 So much as that my thirsty sides will crack,
With this sad term of fasting and disuse.”

XC

Just then each garrulous, complaining pot
Addressed his acclamation to one spot,
 To greet the pale young moon. “Ah, ah,” they
 cried,
“Now for the wine-vault and the shoulder-knot !”

XC I

When I am dead, chant me a lusty line,
And wash my body in the glowing wine,
Give me a vineyard grave, and pile my couch
With fragrant blossoms of the sovereign Vine.

XC II

Brothers, bestow me by some quiet wall,
Where shadows of old friends may lightly fall,
And where the tangled tendril and the rose
May cast their kindly mantle over all.

XC III

Yea, such a mighty fragrance must exhume
From out the fastness of my grape-steeped tomb,
That sober citizens, in passing by,
Will presently go reeling through the gloom.

XC IV

Alas, alas, I have been much to blame ;
This Grape has dulled the honour of my name,
Has worked my sad undoing with the world,
And filled the cup of life with present shame !

XCv

Oft have I sworn, and added *when* and *how*,
I would eschew the cup,— I would,— but now
 The bulbul is a-wing, and gaily mocks
The sheer futility of such a vow.

XCvI

One night, in payment of the stoup I quaffed,
I gaged myself,— and lo, the tapster laughed.
 Faith, he was right to thus appraise the stuff,
Did ever rubies sparkle like this draught !

XCvII

Roll up the parchment. 'T is a faded wile,
Grown dreary with an aged, halting style ;
 At best an idle record, idly writ,
To con beneath the bough a little while.

XCvIII

Sweetheart, if, ere we sleep, these tangled schemes
We might re-color with diviner themes,
 We would condemn this sad, old wagging world,
And build anew the haven of our dreams.

XCVII

Roll up the parchment. 'T is a faded wile,
Grown dreary with an aged, halting style;
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Sweetheart, if, ere we sleep, these tangled schemes
We might re-color with diviner themes,
We would condemn this sad, old wagging world,
And build anew the haven of our dreams.

XCIX

Forego, moon-faced Beloved, ne'er a jot
Of mirth, but revel while thy vows are hot:
How soon the beam-scouts of the searching moon
Shall pass the trellised rose;—*and find us not.*

C

Ah, ah, look up, look up! Behold on high
The wasted moon proclaims our parting nigh;
Rise, brothers, speed me with a deep-drunk round;
Shatter your cups . . . and now,—good bye, good bye!

The six hundred copies of this book were privately printed for Laurence C. Woodworth at the Marion Press, Jamaica, Queensborough, New-York, and issued through the Brothers of the Book in December, MDCCLXXIX.

